The Immigrant Memoir Project: Expectations and Realizations

Presented by

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To

Meeting of Minds

May 10, 2013

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**Introduction**

I come from a small country in Eastern Europe, Macedonia. Born in Chicago, but raised in Macedonia until age 8 makes me an immigrant as well. When I was coming to the US with my family, I remember being excited because we used to come to the US to visit my mom’s side of the family for 1-3 months every year or two. Therefore, when we were moving this time, I thought that this “stay” would be like that too. We would come, stay for a few months and then go back to the warmth of our little three bedroom apartment, where we knew the language, loved our neighbors, and knew our city and its streets. Except this time, the stay extended to nineteen years on March 29, 2013. During these nineteen years we have had our share of good and bad days. We have had our achievements and failures. All of these things have changed my family and me and shaped us to the people we are today.

During my undergraduate studies, I never had the time to join any organization, club or event, which led to not caring about being a part of anything because my plate was too full anyway. Whether I was dealing with my parents’ problems, working, or worrying about getting my own things accomplished, I never did anything. After a few years, regret has built up for never being a part of anything and I have expressed this to friends and family several times.

In February, this year, I was over a friend’s house and I met a member of the group. As I was talking, she told me that everything I had to say and everything I have lived through makes me the perfect candidate for the Immigrant Memoir Project. I immediately began asking questions after I heard the word “immigrant” and then the name “Dr. Stockton” that I had heard from several other friends. The interest sparked and I made a note to myself to email Dr. Stockton about becoming a member of the group. After emailing back and forth, we made an appointment to meet. During our appointment, we began discussing a bit about my background and where I was from. As I was talking to Dr. Stockton, he told me that I would need to submit a paper in order to "gain permission" to be a part of the project. At this point I thought everyone had written so much and I would be behind, something that I have never liked in anything that I do in life. Ideas were already coming to me as we spoke and I could barely sit in my spot any longer. I went home that day and I was so inspired by the discussion that on my drive back, half hour, I kept thinking of all of the things I wanted to write over and over so that I wouldn’t forget them. Somehow, I had found an outlet to document the things that I have endured, but in an awarding way that could inspire others; not make them feel sorry for me.

I stayed up late that night and just kept writing and could not stop. Writing made me feel like I was dreaming and if I stopped I would wake up from being a kid, having family always there, in the city where I grew up and could run into my neighbor’s house without ringing the doorbell instead of having to make a phone call first. Some of these “dreams” turned out to be nightmares as I cried remembering each
one as if it were yesterday, although 19 years have gone by. For whatever reason, I found it very easy to write these things. I imagined myself kneeling in front of Dr. Stockton and telling him my life story, along with any pain, excitement, achievement or failure.

**Expectations and Realizations: Interviews with other members and my own**

When I wanted to join the Immigrant Memoir Project, I came in with the idea that I will just be a part of something. I joined thinking I could meet other people since I was never an extrovert during my school days. The biggest goal I had was to have my story written on paper for someone to read. I do not know how good or accurate of a thought this is, but I have always had this illusion that someone will discover me one day. The days passed as I kept writing and Dr. Stockton arranged a meeting where I could meet some of the group members.

At the first meeting at Dr. Stockton’s house, I was shocked to see that I had written more pages than others that had been in the group longer. This does not mean that they do not care to write as much as me; in my mind it just meant that I have accepted everything and do not care to hide any part of it. Dr. Stockton always writes positive feedback on all of my writings and that encourages me to write more and more each time. The meeting enabled me to hear different people of different places. I realized that I was not alone with these types of thoughts. I also realized that I was not the only one that had gone through tough times; others had gone through worse. I felt like I grew as the conversation went on and the whole day for me was filled with positive energy. Listening to what others had to say made me think of my own experiences and how the Memoir Project had affected me. With that said, I decided to interview people on their expectations, thoughts and realizations of becoming members of this project as well.

One of the members that I interviewed was Ahmad A. He came from Saudi Arabia in 1994, at age 4. He joined the Memoir Project after Dr. Stockton had told him about it and grasped his interest. Ahmad’s perception of how he thought of himself changed because he felt comfortable around the other members, knowing that although different, we are really all the same. This is why he enjoys the fact that the group is diverse because he can express himself freely without worrying about being judged, if the group were only composed of people sharing the same background. Ahmad stated that writing about his life did not create any emotions in him. Despite being comfortable around the diverse group, there are things that he has not felt at ease writing about; the reason mainly being fear of different things that he did not care to discuss. Overall, Ahmad’s goal for the project has not changed; all he wants to do is write and contribute as much as possible.

Another member was Ganj B. He is an Iraqi Kurd that came to the US at age 18, in 2012. He joined the Memoir Project for two reasons he said: “First, I realized from my interactions with friends that
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my story is unique. Coming to America without my parents at a young age taught me many life lessons, which I like to share with anyone who is interested. Second, every day I learn something new about my parents, their families, and my heritage. As a new uncle, I wondered how easily this heritage could be lost simply because nobody in our family wrote it down. I know my little niece will grow up to be an independent adult very soon, and I know she will be more “Americanized” than my generation, so I believe it is not just important, but it is also my duty, to make sure our history lives beyond our ages. Who knows, one day when my generation is dead and the next generation struggles with questions of identity, or simply becomes curious about their “ethnic” origin, they might just find some answers, and hopefully some heartwarming stories, in my memoirs. My expectations were very simple: write down what I know for the purpose of preservation and analysis.”

Ganj explained that writing the memoir had been like watching a movie that had already been watched a long time ago except that the movie stayed the same yet the perspective was different and how he interpreted things now. Furthermore, he explains that he and his family have persevered through difficult times but that has changed him from being content to aspiring more now that he knows he can achieve greater goals.

Unlike Ahmad, Ganj had a very emotional experience during his writings. He has suppressed many of his feelings that he was reliving perhaps out of fear of being discriminated against for his heritage and religion. But as far as the diverse Memoir group, he states that it is easier for him to speak of things and express his thoughts and he also enjoys reading other people’s stories as well. The only thing that he has resisted writing about has been things thought to be taboo in the Kurdish culture such as crimes and mental health problems. Ganj attempts to write his memoir as honestly as he can, but there are things that his parents have confided in him that he refuses to discuss. Instead, he shifts his writings in describing the point of the problem rather than the actual anecdotes of his family. His goal for the project has not changed from his expectations, but he says, “I soon realized that I had signed up for something much more powerful.”

The next person that I interviewed was Ana C. She came from former Yugoslavia in 1998 at age 12. She joined the project because she wanted to document her experiences, since every experience is unique and should be transcribed. After joining the project Ana explains that she did not learn anything she did not already know about herself, instead it has made her more aware of herself, her experiences and how these experiences influence her actions and herself as a human being. She said, “Thus, you can say that it has changed the way I think of myself, because awareness of one’s actions and experiences brings about a personal critique, which often brings a change, or at least an attempted one.”

Just like Ganj, Ana had an emotional experience when writing because of reliving the moment and also grasping things now that she could not grasp at the time of the events. Because Ana came here as a
refugee she has refused to discuss things about the war and separation in her memoir because these are very emotional aspects of her life that she had no control of or contribution to. Having a diverse group makes Ana believe that the experience of this project is even better because it provides comfort and inclusion in the world; similar to Ahmad and Ganj. As far as her goal for the project, it has not changed, but she would like to add the goal of perhaps finding her memoir voice.

My writings have made me think differently about myself with the thought of someone else reading my memoir one day. It makes me more cautious about my choices and just more conscious about my actions; not only as a woman, a Muslim, or any other identity tag placed on me, but as a human being. I did not learn any more about myself than I already knew, but it just made me realize exactly how much I have changed from the little girl that came to the US in 1994 to the woman I have become living here all of those years. Writing about all of those experiences produced so many emotions because I was reliving each moment. I cried when I wrote about the good things, because it made me miss them, and I cried about the bad days because it made me relive them. Overall, I was able to watch my own past spill out from my fingertips onto the screen and I was able to see how I came to be the Yasemin I am today. It also allowed me to put into perspective my choices in the past as well as what I would like to do differently for my present and future now. We all have our share of mistakes, but I call a mistake a bad choice repeated the second time around. Before then, it was just a choice that turned out to be the wrong choice.

I have come to accept everything in my life and that is why it is so easy to write without filtering things, except for one thing. I have not been able to write about any relationships because being a female in my culture it is always looked so poorly upon. But having members of different background makes this easier and more comforting to discuss as well as other things in life rather than sharing them with people from the same cultural and ethnic background.

Ultimately, my goal for the project has changed in the sense that it has grown. Not only do I want to tell my story and have it read, I also want to capture my family history and heritage. This teaches me more about where I came from and the people I came from. I also anticipate that future generations will have their questions answered about who they are and how they came to be because of the preservation I have done writing this memoir. Along with this goal is the goal to continue to write other things. Dr. Stockton has given me so much courage with his comments that it has given me a rather different perspective of my writing that I never knew I had. The most rewarding comment was that I am able to discuss my experiences in a way that others can identify with me yet not feel sad after reading them, instead feel enriched by each experience.
Findings

I interviewed a total of eight people, nine including myself. These included backgrounds of Ukraine, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Saudi Arabia as well as someone of a different religious background trying to move away from it—a Mormon. Out of the eight people I interviewed, I found that joining the project had a few different reasons for people. Some wanted to document their heritage for future generations, some wanted to join after being invited by Dr. Stockton, and some including me, wanted to be a part of something and be able to write. Furthermore, when I looked at the responses of how many believed to have changed as to how they view themselves after joining the project and writing, four replied “no” and five replied “yes”. Along with the changes of themselves, eight out of nine people had a very emotional experience during our writing because of the memories we relived, some more than others.

The question I found to be unique where everyone fairly answered the same was about whether they wanted to have a group of the same background or if they enjoyed the diversity in the group. Every member responded the same; they all enjoyed the diversity and believed that is what made the experience and the group itself amazing and rewarding. Many answered that the diversity of backgrounds is what made them feel more comfortable to express themselves without fear of being judged. Finally, whether what they expected out of the Memoir Project and their goal for the project has changed, four stated “yes”, with the fact of wanting to add more things to discuss. The remaining five said that their goal has not changed since they first joined. From these answers, I was able to capture that everyone has changed in one way or another after joining this project. Maybe not all in the same way, but it is clear to see that everyone has grown from it in one way or another.

Conclusion

There are a total of 48 members in the Memoir Project. We all come from different backgrounds; whether it’s religion, country, or ethnicity. What differentiates us from others in this country also makes us the same—immigrants—all sharing the same problems, fears, achievements and dreams of how we want to live life in a country with more opportunities. These opportunities have allowed us to think so much outside of the “box” that at times we even end up contradicting ourselves and our thoughts. When I first joined the group, I had very limited expectations but my realizations outgrew my list of expectations. I thought I had buried all of my experiences somewhere deep where no one could find them and that they were only memories. As soon as I started to write though, I could not stop crying. Not that I regret anything that I have lived to this day, after all, all of it has made me the strong individual I am
today; but, there was something behind those memories that woke up all of my emotions and opened the flood gates to my tears. As my tears rolled down my cheeks, my words rolled out of my hands and onto the six pages I wrote on the first night and then more on the second night and the third and so forth. I did not know where I had stored all of this information and I did not know how to stop writing. As Mrs. Stockton put it so well, "she has written this in her mind for so long and now she is just putting it on paper."

There was something I noticed at the end of each “writing session.” I felt as if a heavy weight had lifted off my shoulders. I also noticed that I closed off each “session” with a positive note on how it has affected me today. I was not depressed after writing, rather felt a sigh of relief. I kept wondering if I would do the same things over if I had the choice and I still have not answered that question to myself. I notice that each time I get inspired to write something, I look at things at a deeper level and thought. So who am I today? How have these events changed me? How has transcribing these thoughts helped me or caused me pain? I am a strong woman. I do not settle for what I am given. Transcribing my thoughts has made me look profoundly into my life and my beliefs. It has made me understand my life with a different perspective with each transcribed memory than the time when I actually lived through each occurrence. Mevlana said, “It is not easy to be a candle for you must burn first in order to disseminate the light.”